

Nation

National director vows not to cut parks services

By Audrey Hudson
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National Park Service Director Fran Mainella yesterday banned foreign travel for employees and vowed not to cut service at the nation's parks, days after lawmakers called for an end to reckless spending.

Mrs. Mainella told the House Appropriations subcommittee on interior that the parks have "more funds per employee, per acre and per visitor than at any time in its history," and assured lawmakers she would "keep the parks open."

"Managers must make decisions on how best to deploy their resources while protecting the mission of the Park Service and providing outstanding vis-

Foreign travel ended after lawmakers object to amounts spent

itor services," Mrs. Mainella said.

The Park Service spent \$44 million in 2003 including 215 foreign trips, and \$50 million in 2002 including 470 foreign junkets. Lawmakers learned of the spending just days after a Park Service memo detailing proposed cuts and closings of parks on weekends and federal holidays was disclosed by environmental groups.

"I find it astonishing, it's an astronomical figure," said Rep. John E. Peterson, Pennsylvania Republican. "Accountability just isn't there."

"Whoever was approving travel, it looks like they were ap-

proving all travel," Mr. Peterson said.

Mrs. Mainella defended the service's travel record and said international travel had already been reduced by half and domestic travel by 14 percent. About \$100,000 had already been spent on foreign travel this year.

Mrs. Mainella said the ban is effective immediately, but some travel exceptions will be made with the approval of the service director and Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton.

Records show one park employee went to Russia and the Congo at a cost of \$13,200, and another went to China, South

Africa and twice to France for \$19,200. An employee in the director's office took two trips to France for a total \$6,300, and another employee went to Canada and South Africa for \$10,000. One trip to Finland cost \$5,600; another China trip cost \$6,900.

"I was stunned," said Rep. George R. Nethercutt Jr., Washington Republican. "It seems wasteful to me at a time when the Park Service indicates they want to cut back services."

Mr. Nethercutt said Mrs. Mainella's commitment to all but end foreign travel is "fine," but said the parks also are spending millions on domestic

travel that also should be cut.

"In this day and age of video conferencing and instant communication, this may be an area where the Park Service could effect savings," Mr. Nethercutt said.

Rep. Charles H. Taylor, North Carolina Republican and chairman of the subcommittee, and Rep. Norm Dicks, Washington Democrat and ranking minority, told Mrs. Mainella to cancel all foreign trips and significantly cut domestic travel in a letter released Monday.

The parks' budget for next year will contain a ban on foreign travel without the committee's approval.

Mr. Peterson said the closings memo "made us all very sensitive — whoever did that, did it to persuade legislators to give them more money."

Lawmakers noted the Park Service has been given a 47 percent increase or \$515 million over the past 10 years to operate parks, while park visitation decreased over the same period by 4 million visitors.

Lawmakers also are angry at the service for secretly planning four major construction projects at a cost of \$243 million plus tens of millions for yearly operational expenses. Mrs. Mainella said she will review those projects.

"I'll be looking for accountability from the Park Service," Mr. Nethercutt said.